



Charlotte Mason's House of Education,
Scale How, Ambleside, UK, 2009

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ANIMALS AS PLAYMATES.

MUCH has been said and written about pet animals, but I do not know whether many people realise their educational value as well as the pleasure and amusement they afford. Some of the best influences of my life have been through animals, and I believe children may learn unselfishness, obedience and self-control from and with their fourfooted friends. Of the pride and pleasure to a child of possessing "a pet of my very own" no parent will doubt, but I feel very strongly that animals should be more than mere pets to children in the same way (though in a very different degree) as children should be more than mere pets to their parents. The subject seems to divide itself into three chief parts. First, the choice of animals; second, the treatment of the animals; third, the teaching of the children with regard to them.

People are a little apt to accept any pet, furred or feathered, wild or domestic, free or caged, as "such a nice toy for baby," but, at the risk of being thought fanciful, I venture to say that I believe one ought to choose animals with the same sort of care as we choose our servants. When we have found the class of servant we require we go on to ask about his or her antecedents, family, &c. Just so, having decided that you want a dog or a cat for your children, learn something about that animal before you turn it loose in your nursery. A dog whose family has been brought up for generations with children will be a much better playfellow than the dog who comes from grown-up people only, and I have a strong instance of this in my own house in a fox terrier. When I went to choose her, I found a happy family of five puppies and five children, the old dog looking on with pride and confidence as her children were pulled about and kissed and cuffed by their human playfellows. And ever since, the puppy which was then given to me (now grown a middle-aged dog with a family of her own), has shown a marked preference for children; and her daughter (aged two months)

will go much more gladly to my daughter (aged two years) than to me. They seem to understand each other perfectly, and baby is entirely fearless even when the puppy gets a little boisterous. I think there is no companion for a child like a dog, he is so intelligent and so trustworthy. A large dog is a splendid playfellow, and he generally enjoys the romping as much as the children, and is gentle even in the wildest play. I once had a huge Labrador who weighed as much as myself, and in his play he knocked down most of the people in the house, including an enormously fat cook to whom he was devoted, but he never upset a little girl of nine who used to borrow him for walks, and who gave him every opportunity of doing so. A little dog of course can be a more constant companion indoors and out, and of all little dogs I think fox terriers are the best, but that is only my personal opinion, and where all are so charming it is invidious to choose. The only dog I would *not* have for children is a colley. However delightful they are in youth (and they can be exceedingly delightful) I believe they invariably get uncertain in middle or old age, and I have known several who had to be destroyed.

We have cats also, and my little daughter is very fond of them, but they can never be quite the same as a dog, and even the best of them will scratch occasionally, though with cats as with dogs I am sure there is a great deal in hereditary fondness for children. I have a great objection to caged birds for pets, except perhaps in the case of an invalid child who lives in a town, when a canary (necessarily bred in captivity and therefore ignorant of the whole sweetness of liberty) is allowable, and the child and her bird may become very good friends. I had one who spent most of his morning flying about the room, sitting on the dog's back or combing my hair with his beak, but few people could safely let a bird have so much liberty, and to keep a wild bird in captivity seems to me a great cruelty for very little purpose, for a frightened prisoner can never be a real playmate like a dog who knows his duty and does it. Rabbits in hutches are open to the same objection, but if there is room to keep them comfortably, poultry are an unfailing pleasure to children, and they may learn a good many lessons from them. Only the other day I was told of a valuable bantam cock who saved

his own life by his courtesy. As usual he allowed his wives to feed before himself, and they were all killed by some poison. Pigeons are delightful feathered friends, and children can exercise their innate love of giving, as often as the coachman or gardener can be coaxed into providing a handful of food.

Secondly, the treatment of animals. Animals want to be studied individually, for they are as different in their minds as in their bodies, and a round dog in a square hole is as ill matched as his two-legged master in the like position. As a rule a greedy dog is much easier to teach than a dainty one, and if taught kindly and patiently the dog enjoys his lessons, and is very proud of his accomplishments. I have always tried to get him quiet and alone before I begin, and then after explaining to him what I want him to do, and how I shall praise him when he has done it, I give him the order (in one word, if possible), and show him how to obey it. I never allow a dog to be led when he is a puppy. It takes away his intelligence, and he will never learn to follow properly afterwards, but if he is taken on a quiet road and rewarded for every call he obeys, he will learn his duty in a very few days. If a dog has got into the habit of running away, hit him lightly with the longest possible carriage whip *as he is running away*. He does not connect the whip with his master, and will run back to him for protection, whereas if he is whipped when he comes back, he naturally thinks he will have as much fun as possible before the inevitable punishment. A dog can easily be taught to protect his human playfellow, and if possible he should have some old garment of the child's to sleep on, so that he recognises that his greatest comfort is provided by his little mistress.

The third part of my subject is more important from a parents' point of view, because I believe firmly that a child trained from infancy to love animals and to make them his or her companions will grow up to be more pitiful and loving and self-controlled than one who has never known their friendship. Children should be taught from the first to handle animals properly, to coax them in the right direction, to make their bed at night, to take them out walking, and, when they are old enough to do so kindly and patiently, to teach them. I would never allow a young child to see the (sometimes

necessary) punishment of a dog. If a child knows that animals are never to be spoken to or handled roughly they very soon learn to be gentle themselves, and the other day I was very proud of my little daughter's self-control. One of her cats put out her claws and scratched baby pretty sharply. Baby was hurt enough to cry a little, but after a minute she slipped off my knee and ran to the cat, who was evidently ashamed of herself though I had not scolded her, and said, "You mustn't scratch me again Smut, let me kiss you." A child can also be very easily taught to be grateful to the horses who take her drives, the cows who give her milk, the hens who lay her eggs, the sheep who provide her clothes, and so on, and to give them each what they like best to eat.

These minute directions may seem unnecessary and endlessly troublesome, but as our editor tells us in *Home Education*, it is much easier to form a good habit than to break a bad one, and a little constant patience and perseverance for the first few years will make a child an intelligent lover of animals all his life, and no one who has grown up without that love can tell the pleasure and comfort and relaxation which the faithful companionship of animals affords to the busy man or the weary woman.

He prayeth well, who loveth well
Both man and bird and beast.

G. G. F.